Location, safety and (non) strangers in gay men's narratives on 'hook-up' apps

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Abstract

Hook-up websites and apps are said to be transforming the sexual lives of gay men and have been linked with the apparent erosion of gay publics as the basis for identity politics and social action. This paper examines these dynamics in the interview and focus group talk of gay men living on the economic and geographical margins of metropolitan gay culture. It offers perspectives on the importance of location – class, generation and space – for the experience of digital media, the negotiation of safety, and the new codifications and elaborations on sex with the (non) stranger; a figure who is not alien, yet not familiar, in sexual sociality. Reflecting on these situated perspectives in connection with debates on the erosion of gay publics, this paper argues against the search for monolithic framings of gay men's sexual lives after digital media.

Key words: Gay men, sexuality, Scotland, community, mobile phone apps

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Introduction

It is argued that one is never wholly transparent to another (Butler, 2005). Even life-long sexual partners – or especially those – remain strangers, in part. Lack of transparency is salient for gay and other homosexually-active men, some of whom, at times, have sex with each other under conditions where they withhold aspects of their identities (Frankis & Flowers, 2009) to moderate, even suspend, the effects of prejudice and, where relevant, criminal prosecution. Who counts as a stranger in homosexual practice, however, and related questions of community and safety appear to be undergoing transformation in digital media cultures.

In research informing (but not the basis for) this article, a health promotion worker remarked that in a region of rural Australia where there are no commercial or sex on premises venues for gay men, a local supermarket, in combination with mobile phone apps enabled with GPS, had acquired a reputation as a place to hook-up with sexual partners. In United States research, an interview participant likened their *Grindr* (a hook-up app) enabled phone to a "gay bar in my pocket" (Blackwell et al., 2014: 1126) which, according to the authors, allowed him to securely hook-up with a man in a bar which was not gay-identified. How can a supermarket, actually or by reputation, become a sexual hook-up venue? And, how has the gay bar become a smartphone app and apparently a technology for safer cruising anywhere? Implicit in these examples is also the question of how these novel spatialisations and (in)visibilities of public sexualities intersect with the lives of sexual citizens located

culturally and geographically outside the global metropoles, which have for some time provided that basis for gay community life and sexual connection.

In what follows, we reflect on these questions in relation to interview and focus group talk of gay men with provisional and limited access to gay metropolitan life for reasons of their class background, income, generation, health status and place of residence. Situated in the social contexts of the informants, the analysis explores narratives on sexual agency, the sorting of sexual hook-ups through appearance norms and proximity, changed conditions for social obligation in sexual negotiation and the establishment of the (non) stranger identities of sexual partners. We reflect on how these narratives bring social location into debates on gay men's sexual life in the era of digital media and implications for community as the basis for social action on the health and wellbeing, among other matters.

Background

The popularity of sexual websites (for example, *Gaydar*, established 1999; *Manhunt*, established 2001; *BarebackRT*, established 2006) and mobile phone apps (for example, *Grindr*, established 2009; *Growlr*, established 2010) have led to debate on the future of publicly-visible gay communities. A survey of gay men recruited online in Scotland found that half the participants reported that they use a gay GPS app at least once a week and over two-fifths (42.8%) reported daily use (Frankis et al., 2013a). A United States survey of gay men (Phillips et al., 2014) found that a majority of respondents had used a GPS app to find a sexual partner in the previous year; nearly a quarter had sex with a man located using a GPS app. Trend data from Australia has shown an increase in reported use of the internet to locate sexual partners in tandem with a reduction in the proportion of respondents reporting that they socialised mainly with gay men (Zablotska et al., 2012). Gay men's reported

ambivalence regarding gay community and the emergence of "tribalised" sexual sociality (Rowe & Dowsett, 2008) and ambivalent, fragmented engagements with the material and symbolic cultures of homosexual life (Holt, 2011) have led to doubt over the relevance of monolithic framings of gay community as the basis for identity, political activism and for health interventions (Davis, 2008).

These findings, however, need to be reconciled with the dynamic of time-place distanciation in social systems. According to Giddens, modernity is marked by the loosening of the need for co-present social agents as the means of production, in part through communications media (Giddens, 1990; Thompson, 1995). As Blackwell et al note (2014: 1119), *Grindr*, like other apps such as *Growlr*, *Scruff*, *Recon*, etc, permits the 'proximal sorting' of sexual partners. This is because the app uses GPS technology to sort the online profiles of potential partners according to distance from the user. As the user moves across their city or region, the app updates to indicate who is closest. This capacity is particularly useful for gay men residing in negating, heteronormative cultures. Blackwell et al make the point that *Grindr* spatialises sexual sociality in ways unlike those found in bounded, bricks and mortar, bars and saunas. Accordingly, *Grindr* and apps like it give rise to temporally and spatially fluid, digitally-mediated socialities of homosexually interested men. These developments have contributed to the debate over the relevance of gay community since sexual hook-ups can now be situated in the fabric of daily (as in the previous supermarket example).

Gay and other homosexually active men, however, have long navigated hostile environments to secure sexual and social connection (Frankis & Flowers, 2005; Frankis & Flowers, 2009). Laud Humphrey's research on 'tearooms' in the 1960s United States revealed how homosexually-active men, some of whom were married, established sex with strangers in

ways that preserved their domestic lives and kept them safe from persecution and prosecution (1970). Prior to the advent of internet and mobile phone dating and sexual hook-ups, gay men, like their fellow heterosexual citizens, used ads in lonely hearts columns (Hatala & Prehodka, 1996; Laner & Kamel, 1977) and sex on premises venues, cruising parks and beaches provided spaces for sexual interaction (Frankis & Flowers, 2009). Connell et al (1993) showed in their life histories of gay men growing up in industrial working class suburbs and towns of Australia that their cruising culture in public parks and beaches (beats) comprised a 'thin milieu' within which homosexuality was learned, practised and refined in ways that stood apart from the often excluding, affluent, commerce-based gay scenes of metropolitan capitals. How digitally-mediated hook-up culture refers to, extends or displaces these long-standing sexual milieux, particularly for those gay men who find themselves set apart from affluent gay cultures, is a focus for this paper.

In addition, the relationship between digital media and the lives of gay men has been the subject of critique. A common argument is that websites and apps deepen the commodification of gay men's bodies and promote raced and gendered ideals of male beauty, which exclude most people and which deepen forms of self-oppression (Gosine, 2007). There is evidence that online spaces supporting political community are commercial exercises which position gay and lesbian lives as markets to be exploited (Campbell, 2005). Research on the ways in which heterosexual people use the internet has indicated that they also are required to submit themselves to norms of attractiveness and market appeal (Arvidsson, 2006; Couch & Liamputtong, 2008; Hardey, 2004; Smaill, 2004). These accounts resonate with perspectives on digital media in general which are pessimistic about the social ties sustained by them (Turkle, 2011).

In contrast, however, Dowsett et al (2008) have asserted that digital media may not necessarily work to coerce gay men into forms of self and other exploitation. Bareback websites popular among some gay men sustain a discursive practice of macho risk-taking. Dowsett et al argued that this discourse is queerly subversive of gender norms and assumptions of thoughtless risk, and serves as a retort to those who seek to foreclose the choice to have anal sex without condoms in ways that do not lead to the transmission of HIV. These practices are also said to be generative of novel knowledges and practices of bodies and desires forged in the face of a life threatening and pleasure curtailing contagion. Race, too, argues against the pessimistic view that digital media circumscribes homosexuality by enjoining users into forms of normative self- and other-surveillance (published online: 03 Jul 2014) or that the discourse of shopping which gay men use to explain their online practices is necessarily pernicious (Race, 2010). Drawing on Berlant and Warner's take on 'sex in public' (2005) he argues that digital sexual cultures resist the privatisation of intimate life under the schema of the conjugal couple. Race focuses on the "infrastructures of intimacy" (published online: 03 Jul 2014) – the social and technological affordances of digital cultures as they pertain to sexuality – to extend the argument that gay men use digital media to negotiate for pleasures and connections, elaborating on their sexual creativity and producing – not eroding – homosexual socialities. For Race, digitally-mediated sexual culture is performative (Race, forthcoming); it is not the reflection of structure but the structure itself. Van Doorn makes a similar argument in connection with the sexed and gendered embodiments of online life, (van Doorn, 2010; van Doorn, 2011), noting that subjects bring themselves into being through their action, therefore opening space for creative and reflexive online practices.

Similarly, Gudelunas (2012) has reflected on how gay men negotiate their sexual identities on Facebook and similar websites in the context of the potential publicness of communication

on these websites and the shutting down of sexual openness in public life. Gudelunas notes how gay men carefully present themselves in light of who might be able to look at their profile, reflecting on the possible responses of family, friends and work colleagues. Some respondents enjoyed LGBTI-specific Facebook-like websites as some of the concerns over exposure were negated. Others spoke of discerning carefully the identities of those on Facebook by comparing images from other, more sexually open and gay-identified websites. These practices resonate with accounts of how gay men in previous eras relied on signs and cues which only other gay men were able to decode (Frankis & Flowers, 2005) and suggest also the productive transmediation of homosexual sociality.

This paper, therefore, explores how gay men contend with the digital mediation of their sexual practices against the backdrop of critical debates regarding digital sexual cultures and the freedoms and proscriptions of the contemporary era. Using interviews and focus groups with gay men of differing generations and class backgrounds residing in a semi-urban, socio-economically less affluent region of Scotland, this paper establishes an account of digital media located in the life worlds of gay men who find themselves at the margins of gay culture. As we will see, though they recognise its limitations, these gay men value digital media for the way they further sexual agency and provide methods of security, including the navigation of, at times, hostile environments and, where relevant, prejudices regarding HIV positive serostatus. Social location and exclusion give community life its texture and complexity but are also often glossed over in debates on the forms of community taking shape in the age of digital media, which tend to focus on the lived experience of metropolitan gay communities. Our analysis therefore supplies vital new perspectives on how non-metropolitan gay men navigate digitally-mediated sexual life, enlarging both empirical and theoretical inquiry on debate concerning gay community in the era of digital media.

Methods

The analysis presented here draws on data generated for the (deidentified) project in the United Kingdom (deidentifed) which was funded by Blood-Borne Viruses Lanarkshire NHS health authority to address the sexual wellbeing of gay men in Lanarkshire, a county in Scotland. With a population of 650,000 (National Records of Scotland, 2014), Lanarkshire (2,250 km2) is located in the central lowlands of Scotland and is comprised of multiple small market or commuter towns (<75,000 inhabitants each), uplands and rural areas. Despite the county's close proximity to Glasgow, Scotland's largest city, poor transport links and the lack of a local commercial gay scene render some Lanarkshire gay men relatively isolated from support services. Terrence Higgins Trust, Scotland, conducts outreach and sexual health services in the county, activity this research seeks to inform. Participants were recruited with the assistance of Terrence Higgins Trust, Scotland, from their outreach support groups, service users and volunteers. Twenty-four men participated in one to one interviews (n=15) and focus groups (n=9 in three focus groups). All but one participant identified as gay and a wide range of ages (18 to 63 years) and educational levels (none to post-graduate education) were represented. Four men had a boyfriend and one was in a civil partnership.[1] A total of eight HIV positive men participated. Interviews and focus groups were conducted by the authors (deidentified), and recorded and transcribed for later analysis.

Interviews and focus groups were used to ensure 'depth and breadth.' Interviews elicited in-depth experiential personal disclosure of sexual life in connection with websites and app technologies. Focus groups explored the negotiation of consensus and dissent among social media users and therefore the identification of social norms. The interview and focus group discussions were naturalistic though they all relied on a topic guide that focussed on eliciting

narrative on digital media and sexual life. Analysing the interviews and focus groups together added considerable nuance to our investigation of sexual cultures and social media.

The interview and focus group texts were read and coded into a manageable number of themes. Repetitions of themes across individual transcripts were taken as indicative of shared understandings. These recurrent themes are reported in this paper. Ethical approval for the study was granted by the (deidentified). All participants consented to their transcripts being used for analysis and publication with pseudonyms used to protect their identity.

Themes

1. "That's big city stuff:" digital media narratives in context

Participants contrasted life for gay men in Lanarkshire with metropolitan settings, for example: "being gay in Lanarkshire is different from being gay in Glasgow" (FG3), and made a distinction with England (and London in particular) in relation to how open people were with regard to their HIV serostatus: "I don't think there's anybody who's got a face [pic] who says they're openly HIV positive unless they come up from down south" (Alan, Interview 1, 37 years). Participants also made reference to fear of violence and that Lanarkshire towns and villages were on occasion "rough" and therefore not safe for gay men (Ewan, Interview 5, 47 years). For these reasons, digital media took on value as both a means of connection with gay men's sexual culture and a way of establishing safer methods of seeking sexual connections. Importantly, though, discussion of efforts to address the health and wellbeing of gay men in Lanarkshire suggested urban/regional distinctions with echoes of class, generation and social exclusion:

> I think younger people are more aware of sexual health whereas when I was at school we never got told anything about sexual health, there was nothing.

> When I was at school, you had the headstone campaign right from the very start, so that was again, I mean it didn't happen here, that's big city stuff, that's not anything that happens in this area (Graeme, Interview 7, 52 years)

Graeme refers to the mass media HIV campaigns of the 1980s and implies that communication on such concerns for men in Lanarkshire has to overcome a significant sense of otherness reflected in some distancing from 'big city' culture, and, it appears, related perceptions of risk.

Income also appears to frame how gay men, particularly younger gay men with casual employment, practise their sexuality online. The costs of connecting regularly via a mobile phone was a theme in many accounts, either noted directly or implied by the notion that using apps over home WiFi was desirable as mobile internet costs were prohibitive. Younger men referred to accessing Facebook on university WiFi and therefore using it for free, as opposed to paying for data downloads via a mobile phone company. While nearly all the men we spoke with were connected to online sexual culture in a categorical sense, details of their everyday practices show more nuance and provisionality than is normally acknowledged, particularly in health promotion programmes for gay men. Understanding how digital media both convene and differentiate homosexual sociality therefore needs to embrace socioeconomic factors.

The narratives also make apparent the temporal and situated nature of engagements with digital media. Important are: time since one has begun to access digital sexual cultures; at what point in one's life one took up digital media; at what point in the history of the evolution of digital media one became involved, and; one's skills and the evolution of these

over time and in concert with the evolution of digital media. A related theme was the historical reshaping of gay men's sexual lifestyles. Some participants were already nostalgic for the website Gaydar, which went online in 1999 and has been apparently displaced by the more popular GPS apps. Kevin (Interview 11, 47 years) made this point, noting how now cruising for sex could occur "sitting on the bus," as opposed to home on a computer. Noted here too was a nostalgia for the 'gay scene' which was regarded as altering and even abating due to digital media, reflecting both recent surveys (Zablotska et al., 2012) and qualitative research (Holt, 2011), as noted earlier.

2. Proximal sorting and digital worlds

Alongside these cultural, economic and temporal drivers of gay men's use of digital media was an assumption of self-designed social and sexual worlds exercised through proximal sorting and, in particular, 'blocking.' Websites and apps appear to be associated with a notion of a hyper volitional subject who sees that they are freed from some of the constraints and obligations of face-to-face worlds. Jack (Interview 10, 48 years) spoke of this exercise of agency in connection with Facebook:

> So immediately you know that when you step into Facebook you know that you're walking into a world that you have to a certain extent designed and it is mainly in my case populated by people and institutions that I interact with in the real world anyway along with friends who live far away.

Jack's comment signalled that digital media express the action and choices of users. Facebook in Jack's account mirrored his offline social world, suggesting perhaps how digital media both marks, and is used to shape, social life in general. Noted too was the capacity of

digital media to enable contact with "friends who live far away." Social worlds are opened, therefore, to the time-space distanciation capabilities of digital media.

This idea of self-designed sociality was clearly expressed through stories of blocking. In this example, Colin (Interview 3, 20 years), explained how he used the blocking capacity of *Grindr* to exercise sexual choice:

Colin: No, I mean, basically, all you do on Grinder is…you say, like, four lines. They send you a few pictures, and then you say, 'Aye, I'm up for it' or fuck it off.

Interviewer: Yeah. Would you ever say fuck off?

Colin: No, probably just stop talking and then block the person.

Interviewer: [laugh] Yeah, blocking.

Colin: Blocking, you know, it's a beautiful thing, it can't come back and haunt you.

Interviewer: Why do you say it's a beautiful thing?

Colin: Because if somebody is pursuing you that you don't want to pursue you, you can stop that in its tracks instantly just by clicking that little button and it's gone.

Interviewer: Yeah. Is that on Facebook or…?

Colin: You can do it on Facebook too, yeah.

Interviewer: On Grinder you can block?

Colin: Aye.

Interviewer: Yeah. So they literally just disappear off the screen?

Colin: Yeah, and you never see or hear from them again. Unless they make a new profile and then you're fucked, and it's like I need to block you again really.

This account and others like it in our interviews and focus group gave emphasis to the volitional sorting in and out of potential partners. Others have noted how social media support social and sexual sorting (Davis et al., 2006a; Davis et al., 2006b; Race, 2010). App-based 'blocking' – a newly intensified sorting through app-based technology – implies the cessation of communication and establishes the connotation that the blocked are undesirable or even a nuisance. Proximal sorting implies, also, that one's online presence cannot be taken for granted since sudden annihilation is possible through 'blocking.' Blocking is the opposite of, for example, being 'liked' in Facebook or 'woofed' in Scruff. Ian (Interview 9, 32 years) explained that he used blocking to self-define his online interactions:

> I just look through it and I think: too short, too stubby, too fat, too ugly. I just eliminate all the ones that I wouldn't go near and then I look at the ones that I would, like I think okay: tall, good looking, short hair, hairy chest, blah, blah, and so on and so forth.

The example reflects the importance of appearance norms pertaining to age and weight and, by implication, norms of youthful male beauty. "I wouldn't go near" shows that proximal sorting is not simply pragmatic; it expresses mastery over the space and population of one's sexual milieu as a matter of one's erotic interests. Alan (Interview 1, 37 years) used a similarly spatialised term to explain how he had used digital media to warn others of someone who had given him trouble:

> So I warned a few people that I was chatting to locally about this bloke as well, sent the picture and said, 'avoid him like the plague.' But that's one experience and I thought yeah, out of the number that I've actually met this was one weirdo. And it suddenly made me think, well, hold on, it could be

> anybody there. So I started taking more precautions in my own home as well about hiding stuff, moving stuff, keeping myself safe.

Though "avoid him like the plague" resonates with the spatialising "wouldn't go near" and brings forth connotations of contagion. Rejecting others according to appearance norms has long constituted the organisation of sex between men and social life in general. One of the younger men explained that he used blocking to exclude older men who had ignored his profile, which made his own age-based preferences explicit. Blocking can also help to manage online visibility by selecting those who can and, crucially, those who cannot (for example, your boss, boyfriend, friends, parents etc.) see the user when cruising. Blocking is also seen to offer the benefits of excluding 'timewasters.' But blocking on sexual apps extends a fantasy of constructing a sexual life comprised of those who are desired by the user; like a community composed of only men one finds attractive. Blocking positions sexual subjects as shaping their sexual worlds at the click of a button, foregrounding the co-constitutive relation of desire and app technology and bringing into being a 'pornotopian' vision of collective sexual life by self-design (Attwood, 2006).

The idea of designed social and sexual worlds and its expression in relation to blocking technology were not only means by which research participants extended themselves as sexual subjects; they also spoke of having been blocked themselves:

> I remember the first time I used Grinder on my phone, it was clearly something to do with the frame of mind that I was in, as well. I'd got a free trial for a week or whatever it was. And this person, a message came through and it just said: "Stats?" So I suppose I wasn't ready for any interaction because I was sussing out how to use it. I was just figuring it out and having a wee look. And that came through and I did

> think...I was probably...I don't know if I'd had a hard day, or what, that day, but I wasn't in the right frame of mind for anybody to be demanding. I interpreted that as being quite demanding; not interested in me ... just wanted stats. So I replied saying' 'Nine out of ten cats prefer Whiskas,' because I was in a flippant kind of ... and got blocked at that point by that individual. But then that's direct and that's fine. That's how it works there because you're not face to face with each other. (David, Interview 4, 36 years)

David portrayed himself as unused to the communication practices of *Grindr* and in particular the demand for disclosure of the codes ("stats") of sexual desirability. His joking response "nine out of ten cats prefer Whiskas" was a moment of irony that went amiss. David presented his retort as part deflection of the demand for disclosure of his "stats" and part reaching out to the other through humour. David nevertheless found himself blocked out, passed over and perhaps even rejected, though his account admitted that the reason for this blocking was ambiguous, a feature of app-based communication which imbues the social interaction it supports. The pornotopia of app technology is double edged, then, and has to be negotiated if users are to form and sustain sexual connections, however fleeting they may be.

3. (Non) strangers and safety

It was also apparent that the socio-technical systems of websites and apps imbued sexual life with different, or differently-inflected, interpersonal obligations. Ian (Interview 9, 32 years) said:

> It's very hard to explain. Online it's so easy to just back out of it and walk away, but when you're there face to face it's not, and you like the person, he likes you, you've sort of committed yourself to something, you can't just walk

> away from it then. I suppose some people probably could but me, personally, I couldn't because to me that'd be rude and it's something that I wanted to begin with so why back out of it now. Whereas online it's so easy to just shut it down and just make up some excuse: "My battery went dead," or whatever.

Ian captures here the accentuated contingency that applies to online cruising and what could be framed as its 'hyper volitional' character. Co-present social interaction in settings such as saunas and parks appears to require reciprocity, even moral duty towards the other. In contrast, online environments appear to offer more choice or, at least, wriggle room, releasing social actors from some of their mutual obligations. Technology is even positioned as one reason why social obligation might not be required, since "My battery went dead" is, apparently, a viable excuse.

This idea that digital media loosen social ties is often linked with the dystopian view of gay men's sociality under digital media. Respondents in this research, however, also rather often made mention of the 'safety' that comes with the ability to make choices in sexual interaction with 'strangers.' Colin (Interview 3, 20 years) said: "Facebook's almost like a safety blanket because you don't get the judgemental look you would necessarily from being in person with someone." In FG1, Peter (32 years) put forward a similar view:

> If I like him enough, so be it. It's the same situation with the apps, the only difference is you've got the safety net behind you of not having to . . . you've found yourself in different situations in the past because you've met somebody one night, you've got drunk, you've went home and you've found yourself in a dangerous situation. Whereas on the app you don't have that; it takes all that out. You get to know the person first, gradually, and then maybe after, it could

> be two days, it could be three days, it could be a week, it could be two weeks, it could be however long you want it to be and then you meet, you have a date, you see how it goes and you know, you already know a wee bit about the person, a wee bit about their background and that kind of thing, before you go to meet them and that way it's giving you that safety net.

Peter's account suggests that websites and apps provide the user with some means of establishing knowledge of the other – of establishing them as no longer a stranger – which helps the user make an informed decision with regard to meeting up. Implied here, too, is a sense of trust that websites/apps bring which some said was absent in cruising parks, in particular. David (Interview 4, 36 years) said that: "You meet a stranger you take them home" and "I simply don't trust if it's a stranger you're meeting," suggesting a belief that website and app cruising is a step away from the apparently risky interaction with a complete stranger in a park. This view that websites/apps provide some degree of safety was accentuated through stories of sexual violence.

Websites and apps, therefore, produce some complication. They are favoured because they reduce one's obligation to the other – as blocking informed by appearance norms indicates – but they can also be used to generate trust and promote a perception of safety. Risks are not removed but the implied exchange of information regarding the identity of the other creates an assumed reciprocity that may offer some protection, or a belief of such. This view suggests that digital media, among their other uses, are applied to the fabrication of the (non) stranger; someone never met before, but for whom some reciprocal and mutual obligation has been established.

Gay men with HIV also referred to digital media as providing a safety net for them. Kevin (Interview 11, 47 years), when newly diagnosed with HIV, found that the online site BBRT provided him with access to a supportive milieu not available to him in Lanarkshire. Graeme (Interview 7, 52 years) said of himself: "I'm totally honest on BBRT about my status," indicating that the website supports gay men to make disclosures not easy in other contexts, echoing previous research on this topic (Davis, 2009). This view of digital media is densely intersectional, reflecting as it does fears and concerns over living as a gay man in a setting where one was under threat and the doubling of these challenges for those with HIV positive serostatus. This perspective counters totalising ideas of 'community' and its appropriation in programmes of health and wellbeing for gay men. It also suggests that the dystopian narrative of gay life in the era of digital media may meet the needs of those who find they can live in flesh life with confidence and free from homo- and HIV phobia. Websites and apps may figure as pernicious in the discourse of those who are comfortable in their social worlds and see no use for them, whereas other men see digital media differently. A key point of this argument, therefore, is that digital media look different depending on one's social location – geographic, health status, income, class, appearance and otherwise – as a gay man.

This idea of 'safety net' goes beyond the risks of interaction with strangers or living with HIV. The interview accounts give the impression that a mediated social world itself provides a sense of security, whereas the unmediated world is strange and threatening. In this extract, Colin (Interview 3, 20 years) makes reference to his post-internet, generational status and how dangers were addressed in his school education:

> Like I'm very cynical, like in my school, they really pushed forward, you know, the dangers of the internet, and I was like, 'Oh God.' And I still have that with me, you know, stranger danger, and everything. And I keep that

when I'm on that site because you don't know who the hell you're talking to. So if it's in a public place, you know, if they approach you before you approach them and they look totally different, you can just like walk away.

Colin's account underlines how some gay men now come out under changed conditions of post-internet educational and social systems. It also indicates that questions of knowledge, trust and interaction with 'strangers' are woven into digital culture. This idea of stranger danger and the world as not necessarily a safe place, however, was flipped in the following account from another young gay man in a way that gave the impression that, without digital media, one faced a world unprotected:

Bruce: There's always that, kind of, safety net there that there's always someone you know, rather than going out into the world yourself and not knowing and anything could happen.

Interviewer: I think, that's really interesting that idea of there being a safety net there, could you tell me a bit more about that?

Bruce: I just feel that if it is through friends of friends, if something, kind of, does go wrong, …there's always, somebody else there that you can always speak to, or go to, rather than just going out in the world yourself and there's no one there if anything happens, if you're out in a strange place, that you don't know, you don't know the area, you don't know, like, taxi numbers, or anything, that are local, so if you're phoning a long distance taxi, it'll take ages to get away, so that kind of thing. (Interview 2, 23 years)

Bruce suggests that digital media, in this case Facebook, are the basis by which social worlds are now more safely negotiated. This narrative runs counter to the dystopian view or

complicates it by suggesting that there has been a shift, such that, social life is no longer in a priori relation to digital media, if that has ever been the case. Moreover, digital media are not in this narrative simply (part nuisance/partly helpful) social networking tools; social existence without digital media is 'strange.'

Conclusion

Gay men living in Lanarkshire offered views that trouble prevailing assumptions regarding digital media and sexuality. They resisted metropolitan gay culture, othering themselves in ways that create challenges for interventions around HIV and sexual health, for example. Yet the men also spoke of their locale as at times hostile towards them and that, therefore, the privacy and portability of digital media, adapted to their local circumstances, were important to them. The men's narratives also indicated that uses of digital media are shaped by economic and life trajectory factors not normally embraced in framings of digital media and sexual life. These findings suggest that attention needs to be given to patterns of social exclusion that some gay men face in their efforts to sustain themselves in digital media.

The narratives also drew attention to the emphasis placed on self-design and choice, most clearly reflected in the use of blocking to organise preferences according to appearance norms. A, sometimes, cruel culture of proximal sorting, achieved through apps and those websites which offer GPS technology, appears to entertain a fantasy of self-designed social worlds, echoing wider emphasis on the individual consumer and their agential capacity. This is where the analysis came closest to the dystopian framing of digital media as commodifying and corrosive of sexual life. Less pessimistically, social networking websites, such as Facebook, were spoken of as useful resources, as in previous research (Gudelunas, 2012), though the politics of friending (which reverses the logic of blocking) can also be

burdensome and distressing (Turkle, 2011). Digital media are also subject to rapid changes, as our informants pointed out. It remains to be seen if the more pernicious effects of blocking culture will be resisted and subverted or overtaken by other modes of social interaction.

Digital media were also subject to a paradoxical mixture of loose obligations combined with the possibility of enhanced trust relations and were therefore seen by some to be an improvement upon cruising parks and public toilets, where face to face reciprocal duties and the possibility of violence were paramount. The narratives also suggest that digital media are valued for the manner in which they help construct the (non) stranger, who has always existed in, for example, cruising parks, toilets and saunas, but who is now subject to new codifications and elaborations in digital culture. The men also spoke of the related idea of safety, in the direct sense of knowing more of someone before one meets them, but also in the sense that without digital media one enters social worlds less safely. These perspectives suggest the formation of digitally-mediated social worlds that do exercise features of a notional gay community – in terms of trust, safety and knowing of others – but without coming to replicate the collective practices of other modes of gay community, for example, in community groups, sex on premises venues and on the commercial scene.

These perspectives guard against reductive accounts of digitally-mediated sexual life and community. Men in our interviews and focus groups, speaking from their location in Lanarkshire environs and from their generational and class contexts, found utilities in digital media of which other men may not be so aware. The forms of oppression and prejudice they found themselves negotiating – violence, homo- and HIV phobia – lent digital media value as a means of sustaining oneself. These men depicted themselves as never having had unproblematic access to gay community, if we can assume it ever existed as a coherent,

absolutely sustaining collective practice for even the most included of gay men. The men in our research can be seen to creatively appropriate the pros and cons of digital media to establish forms of collective sexual practice in settings that are not altogether supportive. In this view, gay sexual community appears richly multiple. It may be true that some modes of collective social action have receded for gay men, but it also appears to be the case that, in their digitally-mediated expressions, sexual socialities are in the process of productive elaboration articulated with location, understood to embrace space, age, generation and other social differences.

These perspectives supply an important contribution to the much-debated impact of digital media, among other factors, on changing gay community life and related challenges of social action and identity politics. In light of our discussion, this debate is nostalgic, monolithic and metropolitan-centric; a framing that does not serve culturally- and geographically-marginalised gay men since gay community has not always been a matter of easy access for them. We suggest that the debate should be reframed in terms of what collective sexual life could become in the era of hook-up technologies and related capacities for connection with others. Situated and nuanced analyses are called for which investigate the conditions of possibility for gay men's digitally-mediated sexual practices and in that vein how options for agency and autonomy could be secured and expanded and threats and constraints weakened and averted. Location – geographic, cultural, economic, biographical and technological – are indispensable starting points for analyses which more comprehensively address gay men's sexual futures in relation to digital media and beyond.

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Deidentified

Endnote

[1] Civil partnerships in the UK became law in 2004 and provide same sex partners with rights and responsibilities of civil marriage.

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